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**FLANDERS AND HELMAND: CHAPLAINCY, FAITH AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE  
IN THE BRITISH ARMY, 1914-2014**

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## **Biographical Notes**

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## **Abstract**

The year 2014 marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War and the end of eight years of major British combat operations in Afghanistan. Against the background of profound religious changes in British society over the course of the intervening century, this article examines the continuities and discontinuities between British army chaplaincy on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 and in southern Afghanistan from 2006 to 2014, and explores the religious beliefs and practices of British soldiers caught up in the deadly and protracted struggles on the Western Front and in Helmand Province. While acknowledging major differences in the operational contexts involved and seismic shifts in British religious life over the course of the twentieth century, besides important divergences this article identifies striking degrees of continuity between the ministry of army chaplains and the religious attitude and behaviour of soldiers themselves.

## **Keywords**

First World War, Flanders, Helmand, British army, ISAF, chaplains, religion

## Introduction

It is a well-worn truism that at the heart of history as a scholarly endeavour lies the study of continuity and change, and already the centenary of the First World War has proved to be a useful vantage point from which to review how societies and institutions, ideas and processes (including that of Remembrance itself) have been affected by the impact of that conflict over several generations. Among the sorely neglected themes to have been rediscovered in the past few years is the importance of religion to belligerent societies in the era of the First World War, a rediscovery aided by 9/11 and by the religious dimensions of the so-called ‘War on Terror’. Besides triggering a spate of books, articles, essays and conferences over the past decade (e.g. Snape 2006; Gregory 2014; Jenkins 2014), the rediscovery of religion as a salient and even ubiquitous feature of the experience of the First World War has meant that histories of British religion during the twentieth century can no longer readily ignore the impact of 1914 to 1918 on the British churches and on lived religion (compare, for example, Brown 2001 and Brown 2006). This article, which arises from the work of the AHRC and HLF-funded First World War Engagement Centre ‘Voices of War and Peace: the Great War and its Legacy’, seeks to explore questions of continuity and change in the religious experience of armed conflict, taking as its subjects the chaplains and soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force (or B.E.F.) in France and Belgium between 1914 and 1918, and the British component of Task Force Helmand (or T.F.H.) between 2006 and 2014. Drawing on material from both periods, including newly donated manuscript material and twenty-nine interviews with serving British army chaplains, all veterans of Helmand, this article illustrates a surprising degree of continuity between the experiences of chaplains in both contexts, and the religious experiences and attitudes of soldiers themselves. While eschewing the cliché that ‘There are no atheists in foxholes’, an aphorism made famous in the United States during the Second World War (Snape 2015, 322), it will ultimately demonstrate that the religious

(and largely Christian) institutional culture of the British army, along with the myriad and perennial hazards of the battlefield, have served to sustain a much stronger religious culture among British soldiers than that which prevails in civilian society at large.

### **Chaplaincy in context**

However, one must begin by recognising the very different operational contexts of the B.E.F. and T.F.H. Whereas the B.E.F. waged a full-scale conventional war across discernible and delineated battlefields and against a comparable European army, British forces in Helmand were engaged in an asymmetric counter-insurgency campaign against a complex and shifting array of local adversaries, loosely labelled ‘the Taliban’. If tightly enforced Rules of Engagement and mentoring and reconstruction responsibilities also differentiated the mission of T.F.H. from that of the B.E.F., then so too did questions of scale. Whereas the upper limit of Britain’s commitment to its operations in Helmand peaked at the end of 2009, when there were some 9,500 British troops in Afghanistan (Neville 2015, 38), the B.E.F. reached its greatest size in August 1917, when it comprised more than 2 million officers and men, nearly 20 per cent of whom were from the wider British Empire (War Office 1922, 64 [iii]). Furthermore, by the end of August 1914, and having engaged the German army for barely a week, the B.E.F. had already lost 1,382 killed- a figure that represents three times the 453 British fatalities suffered in *eight years* of operations in Afghanistan (War Office 1922, 253; Neville 2015, 5). In terms of the number of chaplains involved, and according to information supplied by the Royal Army Chaplains’ Department (or RACHD), by the end of operations in Helmand the entire Department numbered around 140 regular chaplains and fifty Reservists; at the Armistice, the number of army chaplains on the Western Front totalled 1,698, representing just half of the Department (War Office 1922, 190). Nevertheless, and despite these points of contrast, comparisons between the Western Front and Helmand remain valid

and worthwhile. These were the theatres in which the British army made its longest, bloodiest and most significant effort in the First World War and in the so-called ‘War on Terror’, and where (for our purposes) the development of chaplaincy and the importance of religion can be most closely observed.

One of the underlying similarities between British army chaplaincy on the Western Front and British army chaplaincy in Helmand was that the Chaplains’ Department, like the rest of the British army, began its operations under-equipped, under-prepared, and with no general understanding that the fighting in prospect would be as costly and protracted as it proved to be. The British army’s fifty-one month campaign in France and Belgium was the bloodiest in its history, and left nearly half a million of its soldiers dead in its wake (War Office 1922, 243). In Helmand, the British army initially encountered what has been recurrently described as ‘some of the most intense warfighting seen since Korea’ (Neville 2015, 4; Hennessey 2009, 15; Hennessey 2012, 207), a phase succeeded by a protracted and attritional struggle against the Taliban that was overshadowed from Herrick 7 (October 2007-April 2008) by the threat of IEDs (Neville 2015, 34-35). Given massive strides in military medicine and surgery in the preceding century, and the greatly increased chances of surviving catastrophic wounds, the grim tally of British army fatalities in Afghanistan is only a partial reflection of the torrid experience of T.F.H. According to figures marshalled by *The Guardian* newspaper, between 2006 and 2014 a further 2,188 British service personnel were also treated as wounded in action at ISAF field hospitals. Furthermore, and as the same figures show, monthly totals of dead and wounded surged during periods of intense fighting, notably in the summer of 2009 when Operation *Panchai Palang* (‘Panther’s Claw’) resulted in twenty-two British deaths and ninety-four wounded in action in the month of July alone. This rate of casualties during Herrick 10 (casualties which were borne overwhelmingly by

relatively small numbers of combat troops) invites credible comparison with the First World War, a point emphasised by Padre Philip McCormack (Baptist), then Senior Chaplain of T.F.H. (McCormack 2016), and its severe toll on officers and NCOs is consistent with casualty patterns on the worst battlefields of the Western Front (Middlebrook [1971] 1984, 263-264; War Office 1922, 324-327). In other words, for the front-line soldier the threat and even ubiquity of death and injury remained constant, a situation which (as we shall see) exerted a strong influence on religious behaviour in both contexts.

In terms of the chaplain's functions, the pattern was one of marked continuity, as were the practical problems the chaplain faced. In 1914, King's Regulations baldly defined the basic duties of British army chaplains as being to lead public worship and to bury the dead (Snape 2009a, 10). Although these were augmented by an array of unofficial duties in peacetime garrison life, duties such as visiting married quarters and providing wholesome recreation for soldiers (Snape 2009a, 10), on active service in France and Belgium British chaplains had to evolve a whole new *modus operandi*. In time, this included running canteens, visiting front-line trenches and assisting with the collection, dressing and care of the wounded when in action (Snape 2008, 204-235). In carrying out their wartime ministry, which even near the front line might be conducted over a relatively large area, chaplains were dogged by supremely practical problems, perhaps the most fundamental of which (especially for an immersive, 'incarnational' ministry) was transport. For those who *could* ride, a shortage of draught animals meant that their mounts were taken away in 1917 and even senior chaplains struggled to gain ready access to army motor cars (Snape 2008, 235-236). In Helmand the obvious dangers of ground movement and an often acute shortage of suitable transport (most notably helicopters in early Herrick tours) meant that chaplains were still faced with the prosaic but formidable challenge of reaching soldiers who might be widely

dispersed in platoon houses, patrol bases or checkpoints. Consequently, on Herrick 13 (October 2010-April 2011) Padre Robin Richardson (Church of England), then attached to 3 PARA, found that the most reliable means of travelling any distance was in the cab of a fuel tanker- space that was seldom in demand in any military convoy owing to the obvious consequences that could result from an insurgent ambush or IED strike (Richardson 2016).

A further shortage that affected both chaplaincy on the Western Front and chaplaincy in Helmand was a lack of dedicated church space, a situation that represented an abrupt departure from the norms of peacetime garrison life. Although the B.E.F. fought on the soil of its French and Belgian allies, such was the strength of the confessional divide in early twentieth-century Europe that its Protestant chaplains, around 80 per cent of the whole (War Office 1922, 190), were prohibited from using Roman Catholic churches in these overwhelmingly Roman Catholic countries (Snape 2008, 233). Naturally, this situation demanded considerable powers of improvisation, helping to inspire (among other examples) the famous chapel in the 'Upper Room' at Talbot House in Poperinghe, but being remedied only through the incremental hut-building efforts of organisations such as the Y.M.C.A. and the Church Army (Snape 2005a, 208-212). In Southern Afghanistan, the geo-strategic context of British and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) operations, the fevered Islamist rhetoric of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and an ingrained jihadist tradition (directed only recently against the Soviets and their allies) required similar circumspection and ingenuity from *all* Christian chaplains. As the logistical hub of the entire Helmand operation, the expansion of Camp Bastion saw accommodation become available for British and other ISAF chapels, with 3 PARA's tented chapel of St. Michael and All Angels being in use almost from the start of Herrick 4 in May 2006 (Brown 2007, 61). However, conditions elsewhere were usually much more primitive and demanding. On Herrick 15 (October 2011-April 2012)



Padre Garry Humphryes, chaplain to 26 Regiment Royal Artillery, established a new tented church at FOB (Forward Operating Base) Price, fashioning an altar from a discarded table. This he adorned with a home-made cross and crown of thorns. The altar frontals for the ‘army’s mosque’, as Humphreys described it for the benefit of local Afghans, were originally duvet covers purchased cheaply from civilian traders at Camp Bastion (Humphryes 2016).

Notwithstanding their common and perhaps inevitable problems, both generations of chaplains operated within an institutional context that remained highly supportive of religion (Deakin 2005). Despite the notional abolition of mandatory church parades in 1946 (Crang 2005), sixty years later church attendance remained compulsory for officers and soldiers in basic training (Weaver 2008, 33) and by no means all British soldiers in Afghanistan were unfamiliar with the *de facto* compulsion in religious matters felt by their forebears in the First World War. Attached to the Black Watch and the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards battlegroups on Herricks 10 and 19 respectively, Padre David Anderson (Church of Scotland) noted that the traditional ‘Kirk Muster’ was still zealously observed in these quintessentially Scottish - and historically Presbyterian- regiments (Anderson 2016). In other situations, and especially at isolated outposts, a variety of factors (including politeness, boredom, a sense of novelty and personal loyalty to the padre) might all combine with genuine piety to produce comparatively large voluntary congregations for visiting chaplains (Weaver 2008, 39-40). Furthermore, memorial services and ramp ceremonies, along with their accompanying vigil services, could be relied upon to draw large congregations. In this respect, the experience of the two conflicts once again converged. As the Anglican chaplain Ernest Crosse wrote in 1919 of memorial and thanksgiving services on the Western Front, these services ‘were often most impressive’ and were observed with a ‘great sense of reverence’ by all who were present (Crosse 1919, 73). For many chaplains in Afghanistan repatriation and memorial

services served as equally impressive affirmations of collective loyalty and common purpose (Grant-Jones 2016; King 2016; Scott 2016). Although a policy of repatriation (which had obtained since operations in the Balkans in the 1990s [Grocock 2011, 25]) ensured that chaplains in Afghanistan were not obliged to actually bury the dead, a lot that commonly fell to chaplains on the Western Front (Snape 2008, 228-229), the role of the chaplain in this ultimate rite of passage was not diminished by changing protocols. Indeed, the ramp ceremony (which had come into its own in Iraq [Grocock 2011, 25-26]) became iconic of what has been termed Britain's 'Fourth Afghan War', a development that kept the chaplain centre stage and was in keeping with some of the most famous images of the chaplain's work a century earlier.

In terms of their duties towards the living, the chaplain's fully-fledged ministry of presence was formulated during the First World War in G.A. Studdert Kennedy's famous advice to Theodore Bayley Hardy- guidance that has become seared into the collective consciousness of the Royal Army Chaplains' Department (Smith 2010, 13): 'Live with the men, go where they go... Take a box of fags in your haversack, and a great deal of love in your heart, and go up to them, live with them, talk with them. You can pray *with* them sometimes, but pray *for* them always' (Carey 1929, 139-141). As clergymen drawn in their thousands from civilian churches and congregations, the temporary chaplains of the First World War acted as natural channels for civilian largesse, distributing huge quantities of donated tobacco, sweets, magazines and other comforts (Snape 2014, 95-96). Significantly, this role was reprised by their (largely regular) twenty-first century counterparts in Afghanistan. Although they substituted Haribo and Werthers Originals for cigarettes and tobacco (King 2013b, 70), chaplains still acted as key orchestrators and distributors of welfare parcels to soldiers in theatre. Furthermore, and as in the First World War, discharging

the wider, time-honoured role of ‘the soldier’s friend’ could entail more than a touch of the theatrical. Much as Studdert Kennedy affected an Irish brogue and regaled crowds of soldiers with renditions of ‘Mother Machree’ (Carey 1929, 118), chaplains in Afghanistan were tempted to employ props of their own. During Herrick 13, Padre Antony Feltham-White (Church of England) continued to carry his trademark cricket bat while on foot patrol with soldiers of 2 PARA. This proved controversial for two reasons. Firstly, a chaplain’s presence on potentially ‘kinetic’ patrols was a sensitive issue in the risk-averse culture of the contemporary MoD. Secondly, on one occasion his inoffensive cricket bat was wrongly identified as a firearm, and thus as a violation of the chaplain’s status as a non-combatant (an issue to which we will return [Feltham-White 2016]).

Age also served to distinguish the chaplain in both contexts, and to mould his or her relations with soldiers, who were usually much younger. As in the First World War, which from 1916 saw the British army conscript eighteen-year-olds, in Afghanistan the relative age of chaplains in relation to their soldiers often served to enhance their ministry and pastoral authority. Although fifty came to be regarded as the upper age limit for chaplains in the First World War (Snape, 2008, 188), this was clearly an elastic convention. The legendary Theodore Bayley Hardy VC was two days shy of his fifty-fifth birthday when he died of his wounds in October 1918 (Raw 1988, 2, 100). Nearly a century later in Afghanistan, when the Chaplains’ Department required of its candidates full ministerial training and usually three to four years’ pastoral experience in the civilian church, chaplains of mellower years also stood to benefit from this discernible generation gap. Padre Clare Callanan (United Reformed Church), who initially resisted joining the Department precisely on the grounds of her age, was attached for Herrick 15 (October 2011-April 2012) to 35 Engineer Regiment and the Explosive Ordnance and Search Group. In the course of this tour, Callanan found herself

playing a quasi-maternal role in the care of a fatally injured soldier at Camp Bastion, and remembered that going into her ‘mum role’, as she termed it, did a good deal to assuage the grief and anguish of his immediate comrades (Callanan 2016).

Another constant was the chaplain’s presence as a non-combatant in the front-line. Classified as medical personnel by the Geneva Convention of 1864, British army chaplains on the Western Front were usually punctilious in observing their non-combatant status, with relatively few notable exceptions (Snape, 2008, 245). Although the Geneva Convention of 1949 and Additional Protocol II of 1977 upheld the identity of a chaplain as a protected person and non-combatant, the issue of British chaplains carrying firearms in Afghanistan came to a head as early as 2007, when Royal Navy chaplains (including Padre Stuart Hallam, chaplain to 40 Commando during Herrick 7), announced their support for the practice to the British press, Hallam telling the *Daily Mail* that ‘Maybe we’re passed gentlemen’s agreements, and have to re-think the way we go about our ministry in this kind of conflict.’ However, the Royal Army Chaplains’ Department stringently upheld its own traditions, and army chaplains remained unarmed- a policy that found some strident defenders among chaplains on the ground, including Padre Stephen Hancock (Methodist) who ministered in Helmand during Herrick 8 and who had previously served in the Royal Military Police (Hancock 2008, 41-54). However, this objection to carrying arms did not serve to diminish the profile of chaplains on the battlefield. Prior to *Panchai Palang*, Philip McCormack established that commanding officers actually *wanted* their chaplains to be as far forward as possible (McCormack 2016). Significantly, this very much echoed developments prior to the 1916 Battle of the Somme, when lingering restrictions on chaplains serving in the front line – including advancing with attacking infantry- were finally lifted in the B.E.F. (Snape 2005a, 97; McCormack 2010, 6-7). Clearly, the perceived benefit to soldier morale of having the

chaplain, perhaps the supreme non-combatant, in the front line does not seem to have diminished over the course of a century.

In comparing the chaplains of the B.E.F. with the army chaplains who served in Helmand, it would be easy to overstate the significance of the latter's status as, very largely, *professional* military chaplains. While the typical chaplain who served in the B.E.F. was essentially a civilian rather than a Regular or Territorial –and was even designated a 'T.C.F.', or 'Temporary Chaplain to the Forces' by army officialdom- those Regulars and Reservists who served in the Royal Army Chaplains' Department in Helmand were by no means all seasoned veterans, notwithstanding the backdrop of 'Telic' operations in Iraq. In both cases, the Chaplains' Department saw an influx of junior chaplains as the civilian clergy responded to the needs of the hour, and in both contexts this could lead to relatively inexperienced chaplains facing extremely difficult pastoral challenges. In periods of heavy fighting on the Western Front, newly-commissioned chaplains were posted to front-line units practically on arrival in France (Snape 2008, 214). Given the partly overlapping demands of Iraq and the need to ensure proper intervals between deployments, the situation in the RACHD nearly a century later also meant that chaplains could be sent into action with surprisingly little preparation- especially given the sometimes acute needs of the situation on the ground. When deployed as a Reservist on Herrick 6, a tour that saw armed engagements with the Taliban reach new levels of intensity (Neville 2015, 33), Padre Garry Humphryes arrived in Afghanistan with little more than a night or two in an Accident and Emergency unit to prepare him for ministering to the patients and staff of 208 Field Hospital (Humphryes 2016). Although the sheer length of the army's operations in Helmand ensured significant infusions and even re-infusions of experienced chaplains, sometimes this experience was worryingly thin on the ground. As Padre Philip McCormack wrote in an email in June 2016, and from his

perspective as Task Force Senior Chaplain during Herrick 10, 'The 19 Light Brigade chaplaincy team was quite inexperienced. Half of the team of 12 had little experience of chaplaincy. Three had just finished their basic training and 3 had less than 18 months service. Of the remaining 6, only 3 had any previous operational experience. I was the most experienced chaplain in the team with 12 years in the RACHD and a total of 9 years operational service as soldier, officer and chaplain.'

A further characteristic common to the experience of chaplaincy on both the Western Front and in Helmand was an organisational learning curve, a process that was clearly reflected in the progressive enhancement of chaplaincy training and (for Afghanistan at least) in periods of decompression for returned chaplains. One of the remarkable features of British army chaplaincy in the First World War was that a systematic programme of basic training for chaplains was not put in place until May 1918, when a mandatory two-week training programme began at Tidworth. Prior to this, and apart from local training programmes established for chaplains at Ripon and Woolwich, chaplains basically learned their trade while in post, and through the written or verbal guidance of their superiors (Snape 2008, 204-207). In France in 1917, a central chaplains' school of instruction was established for the B.E.F., its functions combining those of a training centre with those of a retreat house. Furthermore, and although its visitors may not have been aware of this, it also served as a means whereby chaplains themselves could be scrutinised. However, and by its very nature, this facility was for relatively seasoned chaplains, and its small size and Anglican provenance also served to limit its impact and appeal (Snape 2008, 230-231,272). Across the many years of the Helmand campaign, the dynamic was once again towards the improved training and care of chaplains. As Padre Andrew Totten (Church of England), explained in an email of July 2016, in response to the situation in Helmand the Sandhurst-based course for new entry

army chaplains (and lawyers, and medics) was extended from four to twelve weeks, and chaplain-specific training at the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre became lengthier and more intensive (Richards 2010). This process was reinforced by other initiatives. For example, and as its Senior Chaplain, Padre Alan Steele (Church of England) devised a *ten*-month ‘Mission Specific Training’ programme for the chaplains of 19 Light Brigade, some of whom were earmarked to go with 20 Armoured Brigade on Herrick 15 (October 2011-April 2012). Steele’s programme was later adopted by other brigade chaplaincy teams for subsequent Herrick tours (Steele 2016), and included physical and character training and ‘Spiritual Disciplines’. In a multi-denominational chaplaincy team, the latter were aimed to encourage ‘sharing with each other from the particular riches of our own denominational traditions, in order that we might benefit one another and deepen our relationship with God’ (Steele 2011). In terms of chaplain-specific, post-tour decompression, and in addition to a brief period in Cyprus with their units while *en route* for the UK (King 2013b, 70), the favoured method was once again the retreat, or at least a semi-retreat, with a light-touch retreat to Rome becoming more or less standard procedure (Barrett 2016), although this could elicit mixed reactions from chaplains of more Protestant sympathies (Green 2012).

Whether from the battlefields of the Western Front, or from the plains of southern Afghanistan, the voice of army chaplains was carried to the wider church and to wider society. During the First World War, and long before the constraints of MoD clearance procedures, chaplains proved to be avid contributors to the denominational press, dispatching articles and letters to publications ranging from the Roman Catholic *Tablet*, to the Wesleyan *Methodist Recorder*, to the humble parish magazine (Snape 2002; Westerdale 1917). Furthermore, and even as the war was being fought they published more substantial accounts of their experiences and reflections, Anglican examples including Tom Pym and Geoffrey

Gordon's *Papers From Picardy*, Neville Talbot's *Thoughts on Religion at the Front*, and the multi-authored *Church in the Furnace*, all of which appeared in 1917. The choice of media was, of course, much wider for their twenty-first century counterparts, with Padre Robin Richardson publishing an on-line blog for 'The Official British Army Blog' which chronicled his experiences with 3 PARA throughout Herrick 13. In another echo of the First World War, and before operations in Helmand had run their course, a collection of essays appeared in 2013 entitled *Military Chaplaincy in Contention: Chaplains, Churches and the Morality of Conflict*. Edited by Andrew Todd, a civilian priest and the Director of the Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies, many of the essays were written by serving army chaplains who had been on Herrick tours, and the volume (which majored on the ethical aspects of chaplaincy) was presented as a book that 'grows out of military chaplains' involvement in recent operations involving the British armed forces and, in particular, those located in Afghanistan' (Todd 2013, 3).

With respect to media depictions and popular perceptions, the work of chaplains on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918, and in Helmand Province between 2006 and 2014, was normally portrayed and regarded quite positively- even, as the website *Christian Today* noted, in the BBC television comedy *Bluestone 42* (2013-15). The collective achievement of army chaplains in the First World War was marked by the award of the 'Royal' prefix to the Army Chaplains' Department in 1919, and many hundreds of individual awards, including three Victoria Crosses, also went to army chaplains (Snape 2008, 224, 257). In fact, and despite its modest size in comparative terms, the Department won more Victoria Crosses in the First World War than were earned by more than a dozen infantry regiments, including the newly-created Welsh Guards (James 2001, 136-137). Given this situation, and as illustrated by the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey,



former chaplains such as David Railton could wield considerable leverage in shaping the nation's post-war culture of Remembrance (Madigan 222-226), and colourful wartime characters such as Studdert Kennedy and 'Tubby' Clayton were all but guaranteed celebrity status. It should, indeed, be emphasised that it was in this climate of widespread approval that Robert Graves detonated his literary bombshell *Goodbye to All That* in 1929 (Snape 2011), a literary confection whose long-term effects have tended to underline the truth of Luke 6:26 ('Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!'). Significantly, in 2013, by which time three army chaplains had been appointed MBE for their services in connection with Afghanistan (namely Philip McCormack, Alan Steele, and Stephen Whiting), and two had been awarded a Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service (James Aitchison and Andrew Earl), a review of personal memoirs of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan found that a similar, 'overwhelmingly positive' verdict on chaplains prevailed. Instigated by the Chaplain-General, the review catalogued the positive perceptions and opinions of many Helmand veterans and observers, including Russell Lewis and Ross Kemp (Wright and Coles, 2013). However, as in the First World War, and as reflected in the memoirs of Patrick Hennessey, this verdict is by no means universal or unambiguous (Hennessey 2009, 26-27 and 178; Hennessey 2012, 340-341), and whether this image of chaplaincy will survive the passage of time is another question, especially if (as seems quite possible) the public memory of the campaign in Helmand becomes permeated, like that of the First World War, by a popular narrative of waste and futility (British Social Attitudes, 2012).

Despite the parallels that can be discerned between the role of the chaplain on the Western Front and in Helmand, it would be foolish not to acknowledge at least some of the many divergences and discrepancies. Almost needless to say, female army chaplains were entirely unknown (and probably wholly inconceivable) in the context of 1914 to '18.

Furthermore, in organisational terms, chaplaincy in Afghanistan took place in the context of a newly ‘converged’ Department, not one that was crudely divided from the summer of 1915 between its Anglican and ‘non-C. of E.’ components (Howson 2013, 91-92). A further notable difference is that no army chaplains were among those Britons killed in Afghanistan, although near misses appear to have been quite common. A very striking discontinuity also lies in the extent to which commanding officers in Helmand, hedged-in as they were by the complexities of international law and rules of engagement, used chaplains as confidants and moral sounding boards in operational matters, which does not seem to have been the case during the First World War. In fact, just how much this situation differed from 1914 to ’18 can be illustrated by the (admittedly extreme) example of Major-General Sir William Thwaites of the 46<sup>th</sup> (North Midland) Division, who claimed that before an attack he would assemble his chaplains and instruct them in what he wanted his soldiers to hear. On one occasion he even announced that what he wanted was ‘a bloodthirsty sermon next Sunday, and would not have any texts from the New Testament’ (Marrin 1974, 209). Despite the historic religious cleavage between Protestant Britain and Catholic France and Belgium, there was plainly no need for chaplains to be employed as liaison officers with local religious leaders, a role that British chaplains in Helmand could and did play as part of the NATO/UN mission to promote reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. While this contact took place with Religious Officers of the Afghan National Army as part of the British army’s wider mentoring role (May 2015, 34; Feltham-White 2016), it also took place with civilian religious leaders (Feltham-White 2011). On Herrick 10, for example, one of Father Stephen Sharkey’s tasks as (Roman Catholic) chaplain to 4 RIFLES was ‘to help develop relationships with the locals in the area, most especially with the religious leaders’. In practical terms, this involved meeting a local mullah at the residence of the District Governor of Nad Ali. The three-way conversation between the chaplain, the mullah and the governor

seemed ‘very friendly and informative’ and turned on the parallels between Christianity and Islam, chaplaincy provision for all faiths and none in the British army, and the care of Muslim hospital patients at Camp Bastion (Sharkey 2010, 16). This was indeed a far cry from a friendly chat in a French village with the local *curé*.

### **Faith, soldiers and society**

However, on the British side the final and most obvious societal difference was that chaplains with the B.E.F. in the First World War were ministering to soldiers who came from a believing, if not necessarily churchgoing, society, from ‘a social order in which, regardless of individual belief, Christian language, rites, moral teachings, and personnel were part of the taken-for-granted environment’ (McLeod 2007, 265). In Edwardian Britain, almost half the adult population were reasonably regular church attenders, more than ninety per cent of working-class children had at least a Sunday school education, and seventy per cent of English children born in 1913 were baptised into the Church of England. According to Clive Field’s in-depth appraisal of belief and churchgoing in Edwardian Britain, the proportion of professed non-believers in pre-war British society amounted to barely 1 per cent, about the same proportion that practised a religion other than Christianity (Field 2013). Since the First World War (and, according to some popular misconceptions, even because of it), there have been seismic shifts in the religious character and profile of British society- a change that has accelerated in recent decades, even within the timescale of the Helmand campaign.

According to the national census of 2001, when British service personnel were first committed to Afghanistan after 9/11, approximately 72 per cent of the population of England and Wales defined themselves as Christian, 6 per cent as being of another faith, and 15 per cent as having no religion; ten years later, in 2011, these totals amounted to 59 per cent, 9 per

cent, and 25 per cent respectively (Office of National Statistics 2012). Although historians and sociologists of religion can (and do) debate endlessly about the causes of these changes, and the precise religious character of contemporary Britain (e.g. Brown 2001; Garnett et al. 2006), obvious and undeniable symptoms of this change can be detected in formidable levels of ignorance of the Christian faith and its doctrines. If, to the consternation of their chaplains, British soldiers of 1914 to '18 failed to grasp the finer points of classic Christian formularies such as the Nicene Creed, they almost invariably had a knowledge of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, miscellaneous Bible stories and a repertoire of popular hymns (Snape 2005a, 19-58). Plainly, and while contemporary clergy deplored the growth of 'materialism' and other symptoms of religious decline in the First World War generation, they were not contending with the religious and cultural climate of Britain c.2014, a climate Callum Brown claims was defined by 'the indifferent secularity of the vast majority' (Brown 2006, 319), and one in which 46 per cent of adults failed to recognise the biblical provenance of Noah's Ark and 27 per cent thought that the story of Superman 'was or could be in the Bible' (Bible Society 2014, 13).

However, it would be easy to exaggerate the difference that growing secularisation (or, perhaps more properly, dechristianisation) made to the ministry of British army chaplains in Helmand. Despite the state of religious –and specifically Christian- affiliation and knowledge in Great Britain in 2014, in the same year a YouGov poll found that 55 per cent of British adults agreed with David Cameron's claim that Britain was 'a Christian country', and still more, 58 per cent, agreed that Britain *should* be a Christian country (YouGov, 2014). As a conservative institution of the British state, the British army of the Helmand era very much reflected these aspirations, and Britain's historic identity as a Christian nation. Furthermore, it is possible that the army's historic religious identity may have been subtly underlined by its

operations in the overwhelmingly Muslim contexts of Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, and even taking into account the abolition of compulsory church attendance in the aftermath of the Second World War, in contrast with civilian society no great gulf separated the religious culture of the British army in 1914 from that of 2014. Throughout the Helmand era, and quite apart from its chaplains, the army maintained its chapels, its fundamentally Christian ethical standards, and its panoply of Christian ceremonies ranging from remembrance and repatriation services to the presentation and laying-up of regimental colours (May 2015, 35; Deakin 2006). In an institutional context such as this, and given the perennial dangers of military life and operations, levels of religious self-identification in the army remained remarkably high in comparison with civilian society, a point that has been stressed by Grace Davie in her recent study *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Davie 2015, 87, 117-118). In April 2012, 86 per cent of British soldiers identified themselves as Christians, a proportion that had fallen to 83 per cent in late 2013 (*Daily Telegraph* 2014). In view of Davie's emphasis on the factor of 'untimely deaths' as a significant spur to religious sentiment and behaviour in contemporary Britain (Davie 2015, 84-87), it may or may not be significant that this dip has a discernible correlation with the growing proximity of the withdrawal of most combat troops from Afghanistan, which was scheduled (as per ISAF's announcement of July 2010) for 2014.

Viewed in this light, dominant patterns of religious belief and practice seem remarkably similar and perfectly comprehensible across the space of a century. Although, in proportionate terms, there were certainly many more atheists in the FOBs, Patrol Bases and Check Points of Helmand than there were in the trenches of the Western Front, some underlying tendencies stand out. If the default religious identity of most British soldiers in the B.E.F. was 'C. of E.', then its close equivalent as a common denominator in T.F.H. was a

nominal Christianity. In both cases, the famous dictum of First World War chaplain Neville Talbot still applied: ‘The soldier has got Religion; I am not so sure that he has got Christianity’ (Wilkinson 1978, 161; Cairns 1919, xiv). Significantly, even Patrick Hennessey, a notably sardonic observer of the Helmand campaign, conceded that, if faced with the choice of a US Army Post Exchange or chapel at Camp Bastion, ‘bored and sceptical, kit-hungry and spendthrift young British soldiers’ could well choose the latter (Hennessey 2012, 147). While a chaplain on Herrick 15 (October 2011-April 2012), Padre Peter King (Church of England), attached to the Queen’s Royal Hussars battlegroup, undertook a remarkable survey of religious identities, beliefs and practices among its soldiers, a survey that in terms of its significance bears comparison to *The Army and Religion* and *Catholic Soldiers* reports published in 1919. In the course of a tour which saw twenty-three British soldiers killed, and dozens more maimed or severely wounded, almost half the battlegroup, representing a cross-section of different ranks and specialisms, responded to a questionnaire which revealed that 75.6 per cent identified themselves as Christians, 1.5 per cent as belonging to another world religion, and 19.9 per cent understood themselves as atheists or agnostics (atheists being 12.4 per cent of the whole sample). Although almost contemporary with the national census of 2011, its findings were markedly different, more closely corresponding with the results of the 2001 census, and exceeding even those in terms of self-identification as Christian.

Furthermore, statements by the 201 respondents illustrated a kaleidoscopic and sometimes contradictory range of religious beliefs. For example, 30.1 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed in the existence of God (or gods), a percentage that points to a significant contingent of Christian atheists, and only 23 per cent of professed atheists either disagreed or strongly disagreed that fallen soldiers should be commended to God. Furthermore, 79.5 per cent of the sample (including 79 per cent of atheists) agreed that Remembrance services were

‘very important’, and only 9.1 per cent of the whole thought that Repatriation services were ‘too religious’. In terms of personal behaviour, 45.8 per cent carried a religious symbol (such as a cross, a rosary, or a St. Christopher medal); 46.2 per cent admitted praying on deployment, and 62.8 per cent said that being on operations made them more likely to attend a religious service. Besides the widespread possession of religious artefacts, which probably served a purely talismanic function for many, 14 per cent of respondents sported religious tattoos. Furthermore, regimental collects –printed on prayer cards- were valued by 73.3 per cent of the sample, while 95.4 per cent appreciated the visits of chaplains to FOBs, patrol bases and checkpoints in order to offer spiritual support (King 2013a; King 2013b). In other words, and especially in terms of its contradictions and sheer eclecticism, this was a religious world that would have been quite familiar to chaplains of the First World War.

However telling in themselves, Padre King’s findings –and the parallels which they suggest- can be expanded upon. In the British army of the First World War, there were strong localised pockets of conspicuous religiosity, often connected to specific ethnic or cultural identities. Hence, the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) and 38<sup>th</sup> (Welsh) Divisions of Lord Kitchener’s New Army were associated with Roman Catholicism and Nonconformity respectively, and the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, with the various (and largely evangelical) strands of Ulster Protestantism- primarily Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, and Wesleyan Methodism (Snape 2005, 158-159). Among British troops in Helmand, Foreign and Commonwealth soldiers, and Fijians in particular, represented a similar constituency. Numbering around 2,000 by 2009, with their distinctively evangelical and largely Methodist heritage, and their reputation as ideal infantry soldiers and rugby players, Fijians represented an autonomous and supremely masculine religious sub-culture in the British army of the early twenty-first century (*Guardian* 2009). Moreover, and as part of a tradition that has inhered in the ranks of the British army since the

age of John Wesley (Snape 2005b), individual Fijians could play the role of the soldier preacher for a wider constituency, a phenomenon observed by the *Sunday Times* reporter Stephen Grey among the soldiers of 2 YORKS at Musa Qala in 2007 (Grey 2009, 270). However, the army also felt more subtle permutations of Britain's religious culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. Besides his Fijian soldiers, who largely looked after themselves, Padre Richard Smith, chaplain of 3 PARA on Herrick 4, recalled a devoutly Christian soldier nicknamed 'Monk', a paratrooper who ministered in his own way to his immediate comrades (Smith 2016). Furthermore, religious differences between English regions, which were highly conspicuous in the era of the First World War (Snape 2005, 21), had by no means dissipated by the early twenty-first century. Comparison of the censuses of 2001 and 2011 shows that some of the highest levels of Christian self-identification (up to 81 per cent in Knowsley in 2011) were sustained in local authorities across the North-West of England (Office of National Statistics 2012). Significantly, when Padre Garry Humphryes joined 208 Field Hospital on Herrick 6, a hospital unit based in Liverpool and largely staffed by Reservists from across the North-West, he discovered an unusually large constituency of Roman Catholics among them, and found that its senior surgical staff preferred his presence and his prayers while they were operating (Humphryes 2016).

If this was an exceptional case, Helmand chaplains consistently reported a heavy and steady demand for blessings, Bibles, prayer cards, rosaries, and for dog-tags stamped through with a cross (an accessory that seems distinctive to this era). In fact, such was the demand for crosses among 3 PARA on Herrick 13 that Padre Robin Richardson was obliged to fashion his own from the wire of discarded Hesco at Camp Bastion (Richardson 2016; UK Forces Afghanistan 2011). Once again, these traits and tendencies would have been all too familiar to British chaplains on the Western Front. As one chaplain wrote rather wearily for the



*Catholic Soldiers* report, ‘Men, like boys, like anything they can get. You can't load them up with too many scapulars, crucifixes, medals, etc.’ (Plater 1919 26). Indeed, Robin Richardson’s experience with Hesco had its own precursors on the Western Front, as chaplains made up for sundry deficiencies in a similar fashion. Ernest Crosse, for example, had small booklets of hymns printed at his own expense for soldiers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, items he distributed free of charge and which were ‘of a size which men didn't mind putting in their breast pockets and carrying about with them... With these in their possession, it was possible to sing hymns at any time’ (Crosse 1919, 40). Whether signs of the tenacity of ‘diffusive’ or ‘folk’ Christianity, or simply symptoms of sheer superstition, or both, the ubiquity of these items on the Western Front and in Helmand Province decades later is remarkable.

Furthermore, while British soldiers on the Western Front beheld apparitions of the so-called ‘White Comrade’ in no-man’s land (Snape 2005, 41), their twenty-first century successors in Helmand were not immune to similar sightings of their own, and at least one chaplain was persuaded to lay the supposed ghost of a British soldier at one unsettled FOB (Allison 2009, 52-53, 69-70). Yet again belying Max Weber’s vaunted equation of technological and industrial progress with the ‘disenchantment’ of the world (Snape 2015, 356), all of this serves as a powerful reminder that, while there may have been many more atheists in the British army’s foxholes than in earlier campaigns, the extended twenty-first century battlefield that was Helmand Province between 2006 and 2014 was still an intrinsically ungovernable environment for the British soldier and so remained, for many at least, a supernatural and even semi-sacred realm.

## **Conclusion**

Although it is abundantly clear that the British army's campaigns on the Western Front and in Helmand were very different in operational terms, this article has sought to illustrate how, in terms of the human and religious experience of war, they could be strikingly similar in many respects. If British army chaplaincy (especially on active service) had been shaped by the formative ordeal of the First World War, chaplains still confronted basic problems that had beset their forebears of 1914 to 1918- problems that included a lack of transport, a shortage of facilities, and even a dearth of experience and training. Such continuity was manifested in other respects, including the centrality of the chaplain in dealing with death, the chaplain's role as a non-combatant committed to the care of soldiers in the front line, and in a collective learning process. Amidst all this, the position and role of the chaplain still benefitted from the institutional conservatism of the British army, a state organisation that continued to recognise the historic place of religion (and especially Christianity) in its professional culture, and its real or potential value for soldiers. While this orientation was plainly at variance with the trajectory of religious change in British society, change that was becoming still more apparent as the campaign in Helmand wore on, it was nonetheless accepted by most of its soldiers and even vindicated by the circumstances of active service- conditions in which the presence of a chaplain was usually welcomed, tokens of Christian faith were widely carried as preservatives from danger, and religious services (besides their benefit for individuals) could serve as powerful reaffirmations of group identity, cohesion and purpose in extremely difficult circumstances. All of these factors would have been recognisable to British army chaplains on the Western Front during the First World War. More critically, they shed significant light on the limits and nuances of dechristianisation in British society in the early years of the twenty-first century, and they illuminate some important constants in the British soldier's experience of war across the sometimes deceptive distances of time and space.

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